



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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EASTER DAY, APRIL 17, 2022
THE READINGS FOR TODAY ARE:
ISAIAH 65: 17-25; PSALM 118:1-2, 14-24; ACTS 10:34-43, JOHN 20:1-18

DILATED MINDS & IN-BETWEEN TIMES



Giotto, Noli Me Tangere ('Do not touch me'), 1306

John 20:1-18 [Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were

running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.]

Happy Easter!

The birds have been especially vocal this spring...or perhaps I'm just paying better attention in this third cycle of springtime rebirth set against the backdrop of a deadly pandemic. Nothing like a stark contrast to better see the beauty which has been before us all along.

We are all holding a lot these days, and it is good for us to be together once again, with some semblance of (dare I say) normalcy once more. A cathedral full of folks come to celebrate Easter as we strive to make sense, make meaning of all that besets us in this life, including death. The contrasts are especially instructive when seen by Easter light.

But back to the birds and their symphony of witness to life. I'm paying attention this spring to the robin's early morning call to awake to love and work. The hummingbird's exotic dance flying straight up then nose diving toward earth only to pull out at the last second with a seductive chirp made with his tail feathers. When I hear it, I have to stop and locate him, and just marvel at the spectacle.

Then there's the flicker's outsized voice that delivers their shrill cry echoing across the park. The crow's surreal clucking threat as I pass underneath them, perhaps too close to their hodge-podge nest made with industrious use of recycled things. I saw one grab a cigarette butt from the sidewalk the other day and fly away, presumably to fortify the nest. I thought, what a nasty habit! Joe Camel gives way to Joe Crow...

The dove's mournful coo and flit to stay close to her mate. The chickadee's happy little "fee-bee" song that switches on a dime to chick-a-dee-dee-dee to sound alarm.

I'm paying attention to what they have to say to me in this season of meaning-making in our own right.

Paying attention. That's an odd phrase, isn't it? What does it cost to pay attention? If, by "attention," we intend something like concentrating tightly on the person or thing before us, bearing down on the thing we are paying attention to, then it requires some mental tenacity, a muscular effort of the mind, if you will.

I'm reminded of my days in the Army Medical Corps when some drill sergeant would take on the somewhat laughable task of getting a company of reservist medical doctors to snap to attention in formation. Uh-ten-shun! The muscular effort of the mind parlayed into a tenacity of the body's muscles. Pay attention.

But I think attention can be something different, and often must be, if we are to see what is really before us, and to understand its meaning for us. The great 20th Century French philosopher Simone Weil once wrote: "to attend [to something] means not to seek, but to wait; not to concentrate, but instead to dilate our minds?" In this way, it is not the strenuous task of intensity, but the subtle practice of awareness, presence. What does it look like to "dilate our minds?"¹

Astronomers use a technique called averted vision to view the heavens through their telescopic lenses. It turns out that if you bear down on something intently, there is something of a blind spot. It's about the distribution of rods and cones in the retina. Only by giving attention to the peripheral vision can the astronomer's eye meet the flicker of a newfound star whose light left the source 12 billion years ago. It requires a dilation of the mind to see and make sense of that!

I'm mindful that it is often in the peripheral field of vision that we see movement. Surely there is an evolutionary purpose for that, to monitor for predators looking to make a meal of us, but it still serves us well, whether in star-gazing or birdwatching, or simply being compassionately attentive to others.

We need not have a front row seat to the war in Ukraine to have compassion for those who suffer there. Compassion is a product of averted vision, too, an antidote to self-absorbed blindness, and balm for our broken humanity.

So averted vision and dilation of the mind are spiritual practices we must hone to make meaning in this life. Mary Magdalene models them for us in the gospel this morning.

Peter and John, on hearing the news, run with intensity to the tomb, peer in, bearing down on the artifacts of resurrection, but they cannot see it for what it is, and they return home, unenlightened, still bewildered. Miosis of the mind so constricted the light can't get in.

But Mary catches the movement of two angels in the corner of her eye, and brings her grief to them, pausing long enough for her eyes to dilate as windows to her soul, and she then sees Jesus, blurry still at first, but he's there, and soon he comes into focus, the star of her life.

This is an in-between moment...His lightness of being has not yet fully morphed, and she wants to touch what was, familiar and reassuring, but that is gone now, and Jesus holds her differently in the moment, no muscular tenacity needed, just presence, and she receives the gift that changes everything, for her, for you and me, too.

We need not understand how a bird's vocal cords make such sweet and varied music, to receive the gift of beauty with a dilated mind.

We need not fully comprehend what 12 billion light years really is to see the light of connection we share with the whole universe, but it takes a dilation of the mind to fathom that profound truth in any meaningful way.

And to even consider resurrection and its meaning for us on this side of the grave won't come in some muscular effort of the mind, but only if, as Simone Weil said, we wait and dilate our minds. Then we can contemplate its implications for us, as people of faith, who live in in-between times.

Someone said that the other day, we live in in-between times, by which they meant we are between COVID variants, so let's live it up till the next one arrives. There's something a bit cavalier in that attitude, but perhaps there is something to glean nevertheless—if we are so focused on the next variant's impact, or the last one, we may risk missing the moment at hand and the gifts it has to offer.

We live in in-between times. The war in Ukraine reminds us once again that humanity has not caught a glimpse of our better angels who can point us in a more wholesome direction.

We live in in-between times, between the resurrection of Jesus and the consummation of our resurrection hope for all creation.

We live in in-between times when our grief comes with us on the journey, uncertain of what the future holds, and unable to cling to a past that cannot be held in familiar ways anymore.

So what are we to do?

Well, we show up. We tell the story of God's love once more today, we enact it as community in this cathedral, we embody it for a broken hurting world, trusting that God is stirring in our midst, healing creation and us, even if we cannot grasp it tightly or see it fully.

Even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.

Which is to say, we practice resurrection, especially in in-between times that offer the contrast by which we might just glimpse God at work in our lives.

And the birds sing, the stars shine, and we are invited to as well.

Easter blessings, my friends.

¹ This line of thinking on “attention” and Simone Weil’s quote are inspired by an essay by Peter Marty in *The Christian Century*, March 23, 2022.